

As many of you learned from my adult continuing education forum this Tuesday, I had the great fortune to travel to Russia earlier this summer. My travels were part of a bi-annual study trip for the Yale Institute of Sacred Music, of which I am a part. The purpose of the trip was to visit different churches and places of worship around St. Petersburg, and learn about the amazing beauty that encapsulates the Russian Orthodox Church. Beyond churches, however, we also visited many public and state sponsored museums, bridging into the more secular world of Russian art and society.

Like many parts of Russian culture, art and history museums are a place where one feels the heavy hand of state influence and manipulation... I hope the Kremlin doesn't get mad at me for saying that... but it's true! Hundreds of years of Russian history are on display – portraits of their great monarchs such as Peter the Great and Catharine the Great are hung in many a corridor. On one trip, I ventured inside the Kremlin's Armory, where I was stunned to find a whole room of royal carriages. Made from silver, gold, glass, wood, iron and velvet, Tsars were wheeled around Russia in style... The Mercedes Benz of the 18th century. The most memorable monarchical moment was when I stumbled into a whole room of the museum dedicated to a single majestic golden throne. It's arms, legs, and frame gilded gold; it's back a fiery red velvet emblazoned with the two-headed eagle. To take its seat is to assume a position of power, excess, and unlimited resources. As it has been said: it's good to be king.

Being a king or queen must be great. It's like living in your own personal fantasy land. When you're king, you make the rules. Everyone obeys you. You want a throne of gilded gold? You got it. Caviar and filet mignon for dinner?

Sure, why not? ~~Any item or good you desire brought directly to your hands.~~
Feeling scarce, or like you don't enough? Tax the kingdom and bring in more revenue. Accumulate enough earthly treasures to fill a whole house, and when it's full, build a new winter residence for you and the family. It's good to be the king.

But is it really that good, though? You are ALWAYS in the spotlight. Just look at those two princes in England – have they ever enjoyed any privacy? Your decisions are always under the greatest of scrutiny – from foreign and domestic policy to the pants suit and makeup you choose to wear. Upset the people, and you might face a revolt. And if you're disliked, people will always be plotting behind your back. Isn't that right, Brutus? Et tu, brute?

Today, we celebrate Christ the King Sunday. Though the title Christ the King has been around since shortly after Jesus' death, this liturgical demarcation is a relatively recent invention – it was instituted in the Catholic Church first in 1925. It is a day for Christians to celebrate Christ as our King, and the kingdom we are to inherit in the age to come. Our hymns are joyous, the collects _____. But if you look at our sacred texts for today, you would not be out of place to feel a tinge of sorrow as we conclude our liturgical year.

In our gospel text, we find ourselves in the center of Christ's excruciating, humiliating crucifixion and passion. Make no mistake about it – this is not a situation most kings hope to find themselves in. After carrying a cross, the instrument of his own death, through Jerusalem, Jesus is nailed to that very cross with great haste. Two criminals flank him – this is the company the king now

keeps. The crowd divide his clothes amongst themselves. Leaders scoff at him. Soldiers mock him. Our King – ~~left to die on a cross~~ – soon breathes his last.

And yet, this is a death that fulfills Holy Scripture. When the crowds cast lots for his clothing and mock him, we hear the echoes of the Hebrew book of Psalms. Compare Luke's passion with these verses from Psalm 22: "They divide my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots... All who see me mock at me; they make mouths at me, they shake their heads; commit your cause to the Lord; let him deliver – let him rescue the one in whom he delights!" The allegories to the Old Testament extend to Isaiah as well – in particular, Isaiah's image of the suffering servant. For comparison, the leaders of Christ's passion scoff - "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" Isaiah 42 lifts up God's chosen one, saying "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations."

Clearly, Jesus' passion is being portrayed as the fulfilment of Jewish scripture. As bible-smart Episcopalians though, we know Jesus has been fulfilling scripture his entire life. We've seen these examples throughout the last year as we have journeyed through the incredible Gospel of Luke. This fulfilment begins in Luke's birth narrative where Jesus' virgin birth in Bethlehem fulfills prophecy of Isaiah and Samuel. At the beginning of his adult ministry, Jesus announces his arrival at the temple, unrolling the scroll of Isaiah and saying "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Throughout his life, Christ was preparing on earth a glimpse of our eternal dwelling alongside him in heaven. In the Gospel of Luke, this idea is called the Kingdom of God. Across his gospel, Luke

gives us little spiritual presents – teachings about the Kingdom of God – for us to unwrap and understand. Luke accomplishes this through parables such as the mustard seed and yeast measures, which tell of a kingdom of remarkable growth and room for all. The good news of the Kingdom of God is rendered in teachings as well, such as the beatitudes, where the Kingdom of God is granted to the poor. Towards the end of Jesus’ ministry, the Kingdom of God felt imminent – and it is this anticipation that we still understand the Kingdom today.

Luke’s gospel establishes the coming of the Kingdom of God. And it is in Jesus Christ that we find the King of this sacred kingdom and the agent of its establishment. What is remarkable about Jesus, however, is that he is no ordinary king. Unlike many kings, of both contemporary times and of antiquity, Jesus was not concerned with accumulating earthly riches. He did not gather jewels or clothes. Jesus did not sit on a golden throne to dine with the political elite or socially advantageous; rather he gathered at a packed table of sinners and the least of his society. Christ did not need a carriage of gold and iron – no, our king rode through Jerusalem atop a donkey.

Indeed! Christ has completely flipped kingship on his head. No longer shall we worship an earthly king, spoiled with riches and comforts of modern living. No longer shall we view kings and queens as infallible rulers No longer shall we be fooled into thinking that leadership includes sweeping judgment and ferocity. Christ gives us a model for kingship – or in our common time and language, leadership.

Following Christ’s example from today’s gospel alone, one finds three attributes affixed to superior modern leadership. First, in Jesus we have a king

centered on prayerful relationship with God. Christ's prayerful consideration is so strong that it is the first thing he does after being lifted on the cross. They crucify Jesus, and Jesus responds immediately: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." Father, I am praying to you. Forgive them. Forgive those who betrayed me. Forgive those who mock me. Forgive those who nailed me to this tree." Christ the king – a king who prays and forgives, even in his weakest, most agonizing moment.

A second leadership attribute Jesus possesses in our gospel text is an understanding and willingness to sacrifice. Jesus understood this moment in his life and in human history. He believed in the importance of his sacrifice. Through the redemption found in the death of Christ Jesus, we know love. His sacrifice on the cross broke for us the bonds of death and sin, opening to us the doors of the Kingdom of God. We participate in a memorial of this sacrifice every Sunday, when we gather together at the altar and partake in the heavenly banquet of Christ's body and blood -- our bread and wine. Sacrifice is a requisite attribute in kingly leadership.

Finally, in Christ we have a king who is compassionate, and who forgives. Christ's compassion is evident in his prayer for his persecutors: "Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." His compassion extends to a criminal being crucified on his side. Amidst prompts to reveal himself as a Messiah and save himself, Jesus forgives and pardons a criminal who admits to wrongdoings. THIS is the compassion needed from our leaders, from our earthly kings. This is the compassion Christ the King inhabits, even in his dying moments. When the pardoned criminal asks Jesus to remember him, I think he is speaking

for more than himself. He is petitioning Jesus on behalf of all humanity – “Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom.” I hear my own voice, my own yearning for relationship to Christ in this call. Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom. And Jesus, our compassionate king, responds with love: “truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

I return to the original question – is it good to be the king? On one hand, there is the lavish lifestyle, an adoring public, the ability to do whatever you want. Yet, on the other hand, you are faced with great responsibility, a debt of service to your loyal subjects, and if one thing upends the status quo, trouble lays around the corner. Often, heavy lies the crown. And heavy lies the crown of thorns. This crown of thorns adorns our king – a king of great leadership. A king of prayer and prudence. A king of sacrifice. A king of compassion and forgiveness. Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom. Amen.